DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 046 636 RE 003 205

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TITLE The Subject Is Reading.
PUB DATE 30 Oct 70
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the conference of the Keystone State Reading Association, Harrisburg, Pa., Oct. 29-31, 1970

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS American Indians, *Educational Trends, Objectives, Program Development, Program Improvement, *Reading Instruction, *Relevance (Education), *School Industry Relationship, *Student Motivation, Student Needs

ABSTRACT

A possible course for reading instruction in the seventies is charted through the author's observations on present practices and the directions in which they appear to be leading. The introduction of private industry into education as seen in TV offerings such as Sesame Street, in the purchase of book companies by major corporations, and in the performance contracts guaranteeing a level of achievement is of concern to the author, who sees such introductions as threats to programs based on student involvement. His major contention is that teachers who really plan with their students as the object of their programs will involve the students in the program development and will experience gratifying results. Two experiments involving the core curriculum concept in which students created their own materials and assisted in developing an integrated curriculum plan are described. One of the projects was with Blackfeet Indians in northwestern Montana; the other involved adolescent school dropouts in Boston. The author concludes that unless students are considered as the objectives of reading programs, the future may well be bleak. (MS)

ED046636

Keystone State Reading Association Conference-- Oct. 30, 1970

Keynote Address delivered by Dr. Melvin Howards, Northeastern University, Boston

THE SUBJECT IS READING

The subject is reading, but what or who is the object? In this weary Fall of the first year of the new decade shall we still speak of higher standardized test scores, or how many boxes and cards have been completed by each pupil, or how many new machines we have bought? Must we now admit that the new decade will continue to mean more reading failures, more pseudo innovations, and worst of all, more and more of the same in methods, materials and approaches to the teaching of reading? Will this be the decade which will complete the dehumanization of schools, so that they will be even more joyless and grim? In the beginning was the Word, but I fear that this decade in reading may prove to be the end of the Word.

A keynote address should be inspiring and positive, but I cannot deceive myself or you. Let me share my deepest concerns for the field of reading and education as a whole, and then offer what little hope that I can for the future.

My gravest concern and dread, and it should be yours and it should be for the parents of all children in school, is that the combination of private industry and general technological intrusions into education will so alter that system and the students that we shall regret forever this conquest. This in no way indicates that I think for a moment that schools belong to teachers and administrators, quite the contrary is true for me. But the purchase of the book companies by major private corporations like Xerox, Raytheon, Sylvania, RCA, etc., tells me that

RE003 205

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textbooks we use in our classroom everyday will now meet the needs not only of the profit motive, but will follow the systems analysis programming of most major corporations. What works for IBM certainly may not work for second and third grade children who are much more complex organisms than a computer, or a problem in payroll. These mammoth corporations do not know about education-- they do know about making money and marketing and packaging, and they even know about training persons to do a particular job, of no consequence. But they do not know about the education of whole persons living in a complex world. Their answer is, and will continue to be, to produce packaged and programmed material with and without hardware. When you look at the programs now available for the schools, you find that the learning theory underlying these instructional programs is very old fashioned rat-psychology--drooling dog behaviorism. And what underlies and undergirds behaviorist learning theory when applied to learning: control and manipulation of behavior toward some stated objective or goal. Well, now-- who will make these objectives and on what basis and for whom? Are we really saying that what is good for American business and industry is good for American schools-- American life?

You all know enough about teaching and learning, especially in reading, to know full well that there is no single program, approach, methodology or set of materials which satisfies the needs of all student. Machinery and programming does not individualize as they advertise, but it isolates each person from others. It puts the child into contact with a machine or a written program to which he must respond. When will the questions and challenging intellectual interchange of ideas and concepts occur? Not in the program nor in the entrails of that shiny

machine full of tearless transitors. Now the corporations own the book publishers which produce materials we use every day. Their ability to control and manipulate our methodology is implicit, to some extent, in this control. I don't want to be owned by anyone, corporate or government. Let me yet choose my problems and my solutions to them. Let me yet suffer the consequences of foolish and poorly reasoned choices, but never will I relinquish to others the making of my choices and the determining of the consequences which I shall face, nor how I will face them.

Unfortunately, these corporations are playing right into an establishment concept for too many schools and classrooms in which control and discipline have been the keystone of education. They will gladly take over and systematize the means of controlling student learning and behavior. Have we completed the dread cycle in psychology from rats to people back to rats?

Let me sharpen the focus. I am not protesting private enterprise and basically I have nothing against these corporations which are moving rapidly into control over the basic tools of education, nor even do I attack companies like Dorsett or General Learning which have performance contracts, since they only filled a partial vacuum left by some of us. Who chooses your reading books, for example? The principal, the reading supervisor? How much do you have to say about what you'd like to use or not to use? Who schedules the kids for reading work? Enough said. Surely we have not exercised our professional knowledge and influence to affect some of these choices made by others. You are, in that circumstance, not free; then how should we presume our education is democratic in any sense? I know of numerous school systems around this

country whose reading programs are actually determined by the most effective salesman. Well, if we do indeed renege on this responsibility to our kids, why shouldn't private businesses move in? What is it I recall from early physics... Nature abhors a vacuum...

But back again to the main thread concerning the effect of this massive invasion by private industry. How will they alter our programs and teaching and learning in this slightly used decade? Quite disastrously, I think. Who publishes books or instructional materials is only significant in that it leaves you fewer, if any, choices to develop the kind of program you might think is best for your own students. But there is a much deeper threat to us all in this, and it relates to how a medium affects a message, and that bears directly on what kind of students we produce.

I am not a behaviorist and therefore I do not believe , nor has my twenty-one years of experience verified, that people learn the way rats or pigeons do. I do not believe that information must be fragmented, sequenced, overlapped, repeated and drilled in the manner of programmed learning or other behaviorist approaches to teaching. I further do not believe that artificial and external rewards like green stamps or transitor radios build into each person the kind and quality of desire to learn that other things might-- like a smile or firm encouragement. I do believe that all machinery and programmed matter act as filters, which give the child a sense of loss. Human interaction, questioning, humor, firmness cannot be replaced or even substituted. Programming and machinery represent to me a threat to the existence of childhood in all its variability. To program is to mold and control toward a defined goal or objective. Variations on the theme are not

usually acceptable. I do not want efficient drones, do you? I want questions, not on the card or in the machine, to be derived from two minds probing each other in a climate of emotional warmth-- the human touch. But what happens to a generation of kids left to their boxes and cards and machines and their TV? I suggest they will be technically skilled and humanly hollow.

Adolescence in America is a disaster and an embarrassment to all; old age is inconvenient, and middle age is placed on the other side of the abyss by the young; now shall we finally get preschool children too? Shall we teach them to read and write with and without television? Shall we make them highly verbal and eradicate the nonverbal and childish things-- the things of the senses, of nature, of what is? And shall we modify their behavior toward verbal goals as required in reading and writing? And shall we steal from their childhood so that nothing of touch and smell and taste will be important, but only printed symbols and other verbal skills. If so, what shall they talk about? Words and other words? Can they then talk of iridescent leaves, of pungent odors, of joy with kitten? I do not exaggerate. All language is a filter too. It screens out a certain amount of reality and first hand experience; it becomes a substitute for it. But when will the experiential base be laid for children if not in the early years, and hopefully continued throughout their schooling. Do you want more and more accurate word callers and word throwers? The private companies want profit and efficiency; I want <u>passion</u>, <u>perception</u>, and <u>dreams</u>. And the manner in which we educate directly effects the outcome.

I want for childhood what Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Montessori and Dewey wanted, not what Pavlov and Watson and Skinner offer. I do not want my child

in a hermetically sealed, climate controlled, emotion controlled box. I do not want fact accumulators and fact dispensers-- I just want people; erratic, hateful, loving and sensitive to each other.

Let me not stray too far. The technology by which we learn to read and write does directly affect our behavioral values, beliefs and perceptions of self and world. It is in this connection that I must attack Sesame Street. For all the hullaboo about the greatness of this "educational" television for youngsters, it is nothing more than a programmed TV workbook. It is frenetic, and it is superficial. Children frequently can count to 10 or say the alphabet when they have viewed this Madison Avenue package, but two things must be probed: who needs a three or four year old to say the alphabet in isolation? And who needs such a child to count meaningless digits? We do need children who can synthesize from their daily life experience the concepts which underly the written and spoken language, or the number 5. In typical workbook fashion, Sesame Street neurotically jolts the kids about with these isolated elements which they, at best, memorize and recite with the understanding of smart chimpanzees. Language is not just the sounds and sound combinations we make or write; mathematics is not just a numerical system, but a process of calculation and interpretation and measurement. These latter are concepts. And like all concepts, or most anyway, they must be derived from life experience first, then intellectualized for relationships to other elements and relation to some object, person or condition. Then language is attached as a sign post to remind us where it came from. The word is not the thing or the thought, but a pointer to that thing or thought. Sesame Street and shows which will emulate it, will have their day for a couple of years and then fade, unless the corporations so control our schools that

we cannot break out of their box for us. But in the meanwhile, some black kids in Arkansas will be saying letters, words, numbers they do not attach to any reality or life experience. They will say them in sequence without understanding. And their reading will be technically alright, and their comprehension will be alright, but their interpretation will be nill, so that their joy from reading will be nill. They will be programmed to recite, not to speak with a language full of imagery and vitality. It will be a gray language they speak and read. How is this an improvement over McGuffey or the Germanic faculty psychology which produced our 40 minute periods with all subjects separate from each other?

And all of this is being accelerated by the incursion of the barbarian hordes from business and industry, the corporate conquest. In this time of uncertainty and fear, our schools once again follow their society, instead of attempting to lead it creatively. So we are tails wagged by a body manufactured by Westinghouse and a brain made in the US by IBM. Alas, you say, what an alarmist! What a prophet of doom and gloom, or in the words of our enlightened national leadership, what a radical-liberal. As things stand now, in the light of what I've said, I predict this decade will consume 10 years.

Let me take a more positive tack now and show you and describe briefly some things that do make good sense to me in the teaching of reading and writing to persons of all types and ages. I take education to be much more than efficient data collection and fact finding, and I understand it to involve at its base experience out of which some concepts are built and to which we attach language. Words are windows through which we can rediscover experience. I have here some work done in the manner I like to see it done in order to teach all the reading and

language skills, to good and poor readers, and which makes it possible to put the curriculum back together-- whole and integrated.

While I was training 25 Blackfeet Indians on their reservation in Northwestern Montana, a local public school principal observed our non-professional training and liked the ideas he heard. He asked to get more information, and finally decided to adopt our core concept planning for his own sixth, seventh and eighth grade class. For twelve weeks this class of twenty-three students whose reading levels ranged from second to tenth grade, would write their own textbook about Montana (a required study in that state.) Here's their introduction:

> This book was written and published by the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades in the East Glacier Park Elementary School located in East Glacier Park, Montana. This book was a twelve-week project.
>
> The sixth, seventh, and eighth graders decided to write their own textbook about Montana. They surveyed all of Montana's past and present. In some parts it tells how the land was formed, how Indians and white men came, and the development of Montana until today.

Each student was responsible for at least two articles in the book, and the student editors did the editing in terms of grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc. The teacher oversaw the entire project but made almost no changes this first time. As you see the book is well illustrated with pictures, maps, charts. And you will notice that the book is divided into chapters, which required the teaching to all students of previewing. They wanted their book to be as real as possible. When they divided the book into chapters, they learned how to pick out main ideas and details, and other organizational skills. To collect information for the book they used the whole range of reference and locational skills. Word recognition problems were handled

in the small group arrangements which attempted to meet skills, needs and interests. Some small group activity was reserved for projects they worked on including a beautiful mural, indian village scenes, etc. For twelve weeks, 8:30 to 11:30, these kids worked very hard learning and applying all the reading, writing and language skills, plus collecting and sorting facts and information.

They were so pleased with their first book they wrote this one, Rivers and Cities, and let me read the back cover and introduction to this one. You may notice that something deeply educational happened to them:

OTHER BOOKS BY THE SAME AUTHORS: MONTANA

Published by East Glacier Grade School
East Glacier Park, Montana
MCMLXIX

We hope you will enjoy this enlightening edition of "Rivers and Their Cities." It was a twelve-week project done completely by the 6th, 7th and 8th grades of the East Glacier Park Elementary School.

If the Reader should notice some obvious omissions of important cities or river, this can be blamed on the Hong-Kong flu which hit our class full force in the middle of the project.

In writing this book, we have gained information on the cultures of many people and the way they live, also on the backgrounds of these people, their cities and the rivers.

If that does not represent growth and learning and some increase in self-concept nothing does. This second book is 105 pages long, the first is about 30 or 40. Then some decided to write some poetry. It is on the general theme of "What Disturbs Me," and it sounds like

my kids and yours. So what? So this was a means whereby all the kids in this widely divergent group worked together, in small groups, large groups, and sometimes alone, to build up skills and information in a way that turned them on. They had enormous amounts of practice with all the language skills and they loved it. This did not change their life situation, provide jobs or make them anything but Blackfeet Indians-- but they had a new sense (for this time anyway) of their own ability to produce something they could be proud of. These offset printings of the work now rest next to the bible in most homes of these children. That is pride in accomplishment; compare that to finishing some colored cards by yourself in a box, or getting green stamps.

This other book I have is the work of students in Boston and their teachers who worked in our school for drop-outs between the ages of 16 and 22. These kids were in the Neighborhood Youth Corps, and we provided the educational component for them. The students in our Core groups were earning high school credits toward a diploma we gave out. These are their core concept curricula plans, and I think you'll find them quite detailed. '

This curriculum plan is based on our educational concept that each student is an organic whole living in a whole world, and life and language experience are the key to building significant concepts, and that words can be attached only to those-- else we have word callers and throwers. We used these drop-outs to the extent that we made them co-workers in this curriculum develpment so that we could capitalize, and they could, on their own concerns and interests to build a unified and integrated curriculum into which reading, writing and language skills could be inserted at appropriate levels. The success of that school which

which operated for three and one half years between February 1, 1966 and August 19, 1969, can be reported in several ways. We dealt with a total of about 1200-1400 students in this period with a maximum of 250 students at any one time. When we started we had 30 students whose attendance was about 35%, and when we finished we had over 200 students in attendance with an average attendance of over 80%. In addition, some 60 students received our diploma; thirty of them went to college, half on some kind of scholarship. Several others took civil service tests and are now employed in a civil service job.

Alright, we did a rather good job with these discards, delinquents,but I maintain that whatever the problem in reading or in education generally, as soon as we can state the problem, the solution is already available if only we would use it. I do not claim that we can now solve the drop-out problem because of our experience, but we could expand it and probably save 80 to 90% of that type of student. So what happens, we lose our money, and now the government is supporting hardware and big corporations with their ridiculous and dangerous performance contracts, like the Dorsett company. It's a farce. There are other areas where some of us have some answers, but no one will listen. And in line with the talk about accountability we shall begin to teach only what can be measured by someone's instrument. The big corporations do not know how to educate the kind of kids most of us work with, and no machine or box can teach the complex intellectual task of reading and writing-- even people, the true multi-media marvels, have trouble doing it.

Forgive my deep sorrow and dire outlook, but I think it is true and that unless we in Reading rise up to save some of the kids, no one will. That is tragedy.